

7

How to *Flow*

Satu Silvanto

The *Flow Festival*, which began in 2004, is a rhythm music festival that takes place every August in Helsinki, the Finnish capital. It started out as a small event organised by a group of friends. Ten years later its audience figures have multiplied, the festival organisation has professionalised and the *Flow Festival* is now one of the biggest arts festivals in Finland. In this paper, I describe the development of the festival, how it uses/plays with urban space and why it is especially popular with well-educated young and early-middle-aged local audiences. Furthermore, I discuss key factors that have contributed to the success of the *Flow Festival*: the urban nature of the festival, its strong use of and presence in social media, the role of the festival as an after-holiday meeting point and, last but not least, its artistic quality (Klaić 2007a). *Flow* is certainly an artistic festival. However, commercial aspects have gained importance as the festival has grown. Without commercial knowhow, such a big event would not be viable, no matter how ambitious it is artistically.

The paper is based on several data sources: the festival's user studies conducted by Cantell in 2005 (Cantell 2007) and by the festival organisers in 2007 and 2010–2012; an internet survey on festival participation conducted among the residents of Helsinki Metropolitan area in 2006 (Linko and Silvanto 2011); articles about the festival published in Helsingin Sanomat (the main newspaper in Helsinki and Finland) since 2004; and interviews with the Managing Director of the festival.

***Flow* at Makasiinit**

The *Flow – Nuspirit Helsinki Festival* was first organised at Makasiinit, a cluster of old railway warehouses close to the centre of Helsinki. The previous year, the Nuspirit Helsinki Collective had performed their nu-jazz/nu-soul repertoire at the *Helsinki Festival*. With DJs playing too, the night was more than just a gig and was a great success. Encouraged by this, the current *Helsinki Festival* Director Risto Nieminen asked Tuomas Kallio, the prime mover of the Collective, to organise a series of concerts in 2005 under the auspices of the *Helsinki Festival*.

Kallio and his girlfriend, Suvi Virtanen, who had just finished her degree in Arts Management, took up the task with enthusiasm. Together with their friends from Nuspirit Helsinki they developed a brand for the festival, starting with its name and artistic programme but also thinking about the festival's visual identity and so on. From the very beginning the festival organisers wanted the programme to include extra-musical elements. Other arts were also on show and sushi was served, while the run-down venue was decorated using large-scale design canvases to create the right kind of atmosphere for the festival area.

The redbrick buildings of Makasiinit, the first *Flow Festival* venue, had been a hotspot for urban subculture since 1989 (Hernberg 2012a, Oksanen 2006). When the railway company moved out, artists, alternative shops and a bar moved in. Grass-root activities, such as a popular flea market and cultural happenings, were organised both inside and in the courtyard; the site was also home to commercial events ranging from snowboard competitions to TV galas. In 2000 the Makasiinit buildings formed one of the main stages used during Helsinki's year as European Capital of Culture. The former warehouses were the subject of a fierce political debate at the time: a massive citizens' movement, joined by politicians from the Greens and the Left Alliance, wanted to preserve and renovate them, but lost the battle to those wanting to tear them down. The Helsinki Music Centre was eventually built on the site.

During the first *Flow – Nuspirit Helsinki Festivals* in 2004 and 2005 the former warehouses were working overtime. The Makasiinit stood as a symbol of urban grass root activity and, in the beginning the *Flow Festival* referred to itself as an urban music festival. Besides Nuspirit Helsinki and its members other bands, the festival performers included both Finnish and international friends and acquaintances of the group. Kallio described the artistic policy of the festival somewhat vaguely as 'something old, something new – and the rest in between, without forgetting soulfulness', and hoped that the festival would help to create a new musical movement in the city (Helsingin Sanomat 2006).

In 2004 the *Flow Festival* attracted 4500 visitors, in 2005 5000 – about as many people as one could fit in the Makasiinit area. According to audience research produced for the *Helsinki Festival* in 2005 (Cantell 2007), just over a third of the *Flow* audience were students and approximately the same proportion had a degree. Males accounted for 58% of the audience, with two thirds between 20 and 29 years of age. The audience included more 'heavy users' of culture (those attending more than 20 cultural events a year) than most other *Helsinki Festival* events included in the study. On the other hand, the festival also attracted people who had never visited the *Helsinki Festival* before.

Flow moves to Kallio

In May 2006 the Makasiinit buildings were burned down (there is still some debate about whether this was accidental or not), just before they were due for demolition. The *Flow Festival* had already decided to move to the district of Kallio¹. The organisers had found, next door to a live-music club, an ideal redbrick courtyard. With the help of volunteers and sponsors, a 'cosy urban oasis', as Suvi Virtanen put it, was created on the site (Helsingin Sanomat 2006). Making this a reality required artificial grass, design furniture, a huge photo collage and enticing restaurants.

A similar attempt at temporary transformation of an old industrial site into an urban oasis had already been seen at *Koneisto* – a festival of electronic music. *Koneisto* was created in 2000 in Turku, a Finnish city of approximately 200,000 inhabitants, and moved to the Cable Factory in Helsinki in 2002. As a deeply urban event, *Koneisto* can be seen as a predecessor to the *Flow Festival*. Previously, music festivals had only been organised in the countryside (Silvanto 2007). Urban festival-goers had nonetheless started to look for something other than 'tent and mud', creating a need for a similar kind of urban happening. *Koneisto* grew rapidly, perhaps too rapidly, losing something of its originality. The links with the local arts scene and audiences were weakened when it moved to Helsinki. The public taste had perhaps changed as well, shifting from electronic to live music. In 2006, *Koneisto* was only a shadow of its glory years of 2002–2005 and no longer attracted large numbers of people.

By contrast, the *Flow Festival* almost doubled its audience in 2006, with the number of visitors rising to 9500. The festival now operated independently, not as part of the *Helsinki Festival*. The programme showcased various musical genres from soul and jazz to electronic music, indie rock and hip hop. Right from the start the organisers wanted to offer the audience the music they liked, but without limiting themselves to any particular genre. Alongside bringing to Helsinki old-school soul divas, such as Candi Staton in 2006, the mission of the organisers was to introduce emerging, cutting edge performers. So, something old, something new, but always with soul...

The Kallio district has undergone 'centrifugation' and, to some extent, gentrification over recent decades. Traditionally a working-class neighbourhood, Kallio was separated by a sea inlet from the centre and the bourgeoisie, a separation symbolised by the Pitkäsilta (Long Bridge). Since the 1970s the area has been populated by students and artists and has gradually become a part of central Helsinki. Today, Kallio has a reputation as an open-minded neighbourhood, with different nationalities, social classes and personalities living side-by-side – and characterised by a strong 'we' spirit. Various grass-